

What labels do you wear?

Go to your closet. Look what's hanging there.
Look at the labels. Are they designer brands? Discount brands?
Natural fibers? Machine or dry clean? New. Old. Unknown.
Have you worn them recently? Are they your everyday wear?
Do you keep them because, well, you've always worn them?
Do you wear them because they're the "thing" that's in?
Have you ever changed labels because your tastes changed?
Why did you change your taste in the labels you wear?
Has anyone ever asked you what labels you wear?
Are your labels clear to others, without your own description?

Asking too many questions about something too simple? Simple answer: we all wear labels that we often don't see. Labels can be hiding on our backs, or hiding inside. Sometimes we rip them out so no one knows the real value of what we wear.

Of course, I'm not writing about what's hanging in our closets. I'm writing about the labels that hang on us. So, let's think about why we wear the labels that make us what we are? Did you notice, I did not write, "who we are?" Often, it is not clear that we knowingly, and unknowingly, define and describe ourselves by specific labels. Not sure what I mean? Here are some examples: American, alien, conservative, liberal, wealthy, middle class, suburban, urban, senior, boomer, yuppie (if that is still current usage), generation XYZ, my faith, your beliefs, your race, my ethnicity, my house, your apartment, your car, my public transportation, my club, your public park, I watch hockey, you play golf, we speak English, they don't.

On and on this could go - add some yourself. These are all labels. They may be words on this page, but those words represent an attitude by which we define and conduct ourselves. An attitude, which separates us from others and often joins us with others of like labels. Labels have a community feel, at the same time they have a barrier feel. This chaplain often says, this is the picket fence syndrome: "I see you, but I cannot touch you, and it keeps you from touching me."

Labels create boundaries. They cordon us off from others who are not like us. They allow us to remain in the company of others like us. At the same time they

help us remain in a “safe place,” such that we do not have to encounter others who we do not understand, are uncomfortable with, and do not care to meet. This can happen even if it is not in our best interest.

Labels allow others to define us. Whether those definitions are accurate, warranted or desired, our wearing them - along with the like-labeled others - sets us up to be seen in a specific way by outsiders to that label. If my label minded buddies are party people, who often drink a touch too much and get a bit too wild, is there a possibility that I am seen as a similar type person - even though I rarely drink? If I am an independent thinker who may agree with progressive ideas, does that make me any less of an independent? Does that mean I am the opposition to a conservative thinker? Who decides that? Maybe I do, by how I let those decisions outwardly control my actions and words. Maybe I do, by overtly joining in with those who are more dedicated to that thinking. Maybe I do, by not wearing a label that says, “what they do is not me.”

When we wear labels, we allow ourselves to slip into defined groups, isolated experiences, exclusionary circumstances. When we wear labels we actually “hold prejudice to our own beliefs” (so says Thomas Paine). That prejudice holds us back from expanding our minds and our world view. Labels can create a prejudice within ourselves, and a prejudice by others towards us. This is not growth evolving. It is personal devolving.

Best regards to all.

Chaplain on Signal Mountain

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